

Sermon for Epiphany 5, Year B, February 5, 2012
Mark 1:29-39

Good Morning!

Two nights ago, seven people from our parish convened at the Priory Spirituality Center in Lacey for a 24 hour silent retreat. We had a brief gathering after dinner on Friday night with an introduction to the retreat, a twenty minute period of silent meditation followed by compline. We then imposed what is referred to in monastic circles as the “Great Silence,” where all conversation is set aside except in certain designated areas. The idea is create a place of silence, solitude, and listening. Yesterday, we had 5 twenty-five minutes periods of silent meditation followed by eucharist in the afternoon, with the retreat concluding with a period of reflection.

This is not the first time that I have made a silent retreat. I remember back in the late 1980’s, I participated in a week-long retreat led by Fr. Thomas Keating on the Kitsap Peninsula. Fr Keating is a Trappist monk and a teacher of a form of contemplative prayer called Centering Prayer. There were roughly fifty of us in attendance. The retreat included three talks by Fr. Keating with three hours of contemplative prayer each day. Silence was observed at meal times and in the dorms where we were staying. I found the retreat to be powerful – both the experience of sitting in silence, and listening to the talks by Fr. Keating – a person I consider to be a modern spiritual master. But there was something else I remember about that retreat. What I recall is that I went to bed each night exhausted. It seemed odd at the time that I should feel tired because, after all, I wasn’t doing anything physically demanding. I was simply sitting. But the psychic energy of sitting three hours a day, and sitting through three absorbing talks each day where I was really paying attention, and finally maintaining silence throughout the retreat, was in fact a “work out.”

I also recall seeing a flyer some years ago about a “Poustina” – a small retreat site near Eatonville. The concept of Poustina comes out of the Russian tradition and emphasizes a quiet place where one can be with God. The retreat site near Eatonville consists of a simple wooden structure that houses a bed, table and chair. An organization called the “Second Mile” runs the retreat site. People can sign up to make a retreat there. They are encouraged not to bring any electronics, books, radios, or other diversions.

Rather they should bring a bible and fruit juice to facilitate their retreat of bible reading, reflection, silence, and fasting. The retreats can be of various lengths depending upon the waiting list and the stamina of the person making the retreat. The purpose is simply to be with God without the distractions of modern life.

All of these examples reflect the desire of many people to step back from their lives, and to spend time with God. The practice of silence, solitude, and prayer of the heart has a long history in the Christian tradition. Down through the ages, men and women have sought a deeper communion with God by withdrawing into the silence and simply being there with God. I am of the mind that this is absolutely essential for any person who is truly serious about their relationship with God. At some point, we need to unplug and seek a quiet place where we can go within.

We do not know much about Jesus' prayer life. We have a few examples of the prayers that Jesus prayed or taught – the Lord's Prayer being the most famous, but also his high priestly prayer in John's Gospel, his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane the night he was betrayed, and his prayer from the cross. We also have an intriguing verse in our gospel lesson today from Mark. "In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed." What this verse suggests is that even Jesus himself felt the need to retreat to that quiet place to be alone with the Father. In the midst of a demanding public ministry of preaching, teaching, healing, and traveling here and there with his disciples, we have these words describing Jesus seeking solitude, silence, and time to pray deeply. In the midst of loud words of action in our gospel lesson, we have this nearly silent sentence of stillness, solitude, quiet, and contemplation.

The key to understanding Jesus' ministry – the key to his ability to maintain a demanding ministry – are these periods of silence, solitude, and deep prayer to the Father. We may claim that Jesus was the Son of God and that he was divine, but he was also human, and like any human who desires a centered life in God, he needed to make time to be with the Father without being disturbed.

But within our gospel lesson, we also find there is a challenge to seeking time with God. We are told that Peter and his companions hunted for Jesus, and when they found him, they said everyone was looking for him. It's as if our lesson is saying that Peter had his own idea what Jesus should be doing,

and it wasn't sitting in solitude and praying. From Peter's perspective, there were anxious crowds who awaited Jesus' immediate attention.

It will come as no surprise to anyone that we live in a noisy, active, action-oriented world. We value activity, making things happen, measuring our progress in our undertakings, and establishing connections with other people. The idea of willingly retreating from the active world would probably strike many people as possibly selfish, self-absorbed, unnecessary, or out of touch with the real needs of the world. I remember the cartoon I saw many years ago that showed a middle-aged bald cleric on his knees in his office holding his hands in prayer, and looking over his shoulder at this matronly looking woman (his secretary) standing behind him with her hands on her hips and a pencil behind one ear looking down at him and saying, "Oh good, you're not busy." We live in a world that doesn't support quiet withdrawal and solitude. And yet, I think that was precisely the key to Jesus' ministry, and it should be for ours as well.

Henri Nouwen, a Roman Catholic priest and author of many books on the Christian life, said that without these lonely places in our lives, these opportunities for deep quiet and stillness and prayer, our words lose their meaning, our speaking no longer heals, our closeness cannot cure, our actions become empty gestures. Christian living and Christian ministry lose their bearing and their vitality without silence. As one person once said to me, if we don't take these opportunities to pray and to be quiet, what will fan the flame within?

In Isaiah, we are told that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and confidence shall be our strength. We need to carve out those opportunities to retreat, to be quiet, to listen, and to pray. We need to do what Jesus did. As one author observed, being quiet is how being saved sounds.

